



# STRETCHING: THE PANACEA FOR SURGERY EVILS

By Sara Chatwin

**T**he debate is still raging as to the benefits of stretching for athletes. Whilst some detractors take the view that there is not sufficient evidence to endorse or discontinue routine pre- or post-event stretching to prevent injury among competitive or recreational athletes, others believe vehemently that stretching, muscle conditioning and flexibility training may be the most undervalued facet of sports conditioning.

Whilst many elite athletes wait patiently for the end of the playing season to consult with the specific medical practitioner to ascertain the severity of damage and the likelihood that surgery will be the next step, many athletes are now beginning to look at their chosen sport with an eye for prevention!

In general terms, flexibility has been defined as the range of motion about a joint and its surrounding muscles during

a passive movement. Passive in this context means no active muscle involvement is required to hold the stretch. Instead gravity or a partner provides the force for the stretch. It follows that by increasing the 'joint range of motion' performance can be improved and further, injury may be reduced due to the fact that a limb can move further before an injury occurs. In addition to this, some would say that increased limb range may incorporate greater limb strength and an ability on the part of the athlete to recognise when they are compromising their bodies.

However, there are different types of stretches and techniques that work better for certain disciplines, for example, Muscle tightness, which has been associated with an increased risk of muscle tears, can be reduced before training or competing with dynamic stretching. For this reason many coaches now favour dynamic stretches over static stretches as part of the warm up.



Ironically, static stretching just prior to an event may actually be detrimental to performance and offer no protection from injury. The emphasis is on "may" however, as a closer examination of the scientific literature shows that effects are often minimal and by no means conclusive.

Certain competitive sports can have quite an unbalancing effect on the body. Tennis is a great example of a sport that often places the body under extreme stress on one side. For example, the same arm is used to hit thousands of shots over and over again. The same is true for sports like soccer and Australian rules where one kicking foot usually predominates. A flexibility training program can help to correct these disparities preventing chronic, over-use injury.

However, even though research is needed to determine the proper role of stretching in sports, especially as there are increasing numbers of athletes and growing recognition that all people need to increase their physical activity to improve their health and quality of life, there are a few tips that athletes and lay sports alike could heed:

Choose a type of stretching regime that suits your sport or discipline.

Consult with a specialist to create a programme that is appropriate for your needs and get him/her to run through it with you regularly to make sure you're doing the stretches correctly.

Have a complete medical or physiotherapeutic check prior to enacting a stretching regime.

Change stretching and flexibility plans to ensure that all muscle groups are being fired up.

Have regular muscle rest periods to enable muscle growth and repair. ■

